



Behaviorist Approach

by [Saul McLeod](#)  published 2007

Behaviorism (also called the behavioral approach) was the primary paradigm in psychology between 1920s to 1950 and is based on a number of underlying assumptions regarding methodology and behavioral analysis:

- * Psychology should be seen as a science. Theories need to be supported by empirical data obtained through **careful and controlled observation** and **measurement of behavior**. Watson stated that ““psychology as a behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is ... **prediction and control**”” (1913, p. 158).
- * Behaviorism is primarily concerned with **observable behavior**, as opposed to internal events like thinking and emotion. Observable (i.e. external) behavior can be **objectively** and **scientifically measured**. Internal events, such as thinking should be explained through behavioral terms (or eliminated altogether).
- * People have no free will – a person’s **environment determines their behavior**
- * When born our mind is '**tabula rasa**' (a blank slate).
- * There is **little difference between** the learning that takes place in **humans** and that in other **animals**. Therefore research can be carried out on animals as well as humans. < *worldview*
- * Behavior is the result of **stimulus – response** (i.e. all behavior, no matter how complex, can be reduced to a simple stimulus – response association). Watson described the purpose of psychology as: ““To **predict**, given the stimulus, what reaction will take place; or, given the reaction, state what the situation or stimulus is that has caused the reaction”” (1930, p. 11).
- * All behavior is **learnt from the environment**. We learn new behavior through **classical** or **operant** conditioning.

The History of Behaviorism

- * **Pavlov** (1897) published the results of an experiment on conditioning after originally studying digestion in dogs.
- * Watson (1913) launches the behavioral school of psychology (classical conditioning), publishing an article, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It".

- * **Watson and Rayner** (1920) conditioned an orphan called Albert B (aka Little Albert) to fear a white rat. ^{^ sad}
- * **Thorndike** (1905) formalized the "*Law of Effect*".
- * **Skinner** (1936) wrote "The Behavior of Organisms" and introduced the concepts of operant conditioning and shaping.
- * Clark Hull's (1943) *Principles of Behavior* was published.
- * B.F. Skinner (1948) published *Walden Two* in which he described a utopian society founded upon behaviorist principles.
- * **Bandura** (1963) publishes a book called the "*Social Learning Theory and Personality development*" which combines both cognitive and behavioral frameworks.
- * Journal of the *Experimental Analysis of Behavior* (begun in 1958)
- * B.F. Skinner (1971) published his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, where he argues that free will is an illusion. < worldview

Behaviorism Summary

Key Features

- Stimulus - Response
- **Classical Conditioning & Operant Conditioning**
- Reinforcement & Punishment (Skinner)
- Objective Measurement
- Social Learning Theory (**Bandura**)
- **Nomothetic**
- **Reductionism**

Basic Assumptions

- Psychology should be seen as a science, to be studied in a scientific manner.
- Behaviorism is primarily concerned with observable behavior, as opposed to internal events like thinking.
- Behavior is the result of stimulus – response (i.e. all behavior, no matter how complex, can be reduced to a simple stimulus – response features).
- Behavior is determined by the

Methodology

- Lab Experiments
- **Little Albert**
- **Edward Thorndike** (the cat in a puzzle box)
- Skinner box (rats & pigeons)
- **Pavlov's Dogs**
- **Bandura Bobo Doll Experiment**
- **Ethical Considerations**

Areas of Application

- Gender Role Development
- **Behavioral Therapy** (e.g. Flooding)
- Phobias
- **Behavior-Modification**
- **Aversion Therapy**
- **Scientific Methods**
- Relationships
- Language
- Moral Development
- Aggression

environment (e.g. conditioning).

- Addiction

Strengths

- **Scientific**
- Highly **applicable** (e.g. therapy)
- Emphasizes **objective measurement**
- Many experiments to **support** theories
- Identified **comparisons between animals** (Pavlov) **and humans** (Watson & Rayner - Little Albert)

Limitations

- Ignores **mediational processes**
- Ignores **biology** (e.g. testosterone)
- Experiments – low ecological validity
- Humanism – can't compare animals to humans
- **Reductionist**

Critical Evaluation

Humanism (e.g. Rogers) rejects the scientific method of using experiments to measure and control variables because it creates an artificial environment and has low ecological validity.

Humanism also rejects the **nomothetic approach** of behaviorism as they view humans as being unique and believe humans cannot be compared with animals (who aren't susceptible to demand characteristics). This is known as an idiographic approach.


Humanistic psychology also assumes that humans have free will (personal agency) to make their own decisions in life and do not follow the deterministic laws of **science**.

The **psychodynamic approach** (Freud) criticizes behaviorism as it does not take into account the **unconscious mind's** influence on behavior, and instead focuses on external observable behavior. Freud as rejects that idea that people are born a blank slate (tabula rasa) and states that people are born with instincts (e.g. eros and thanatos).

Biological psychology – Chromosomes and hormones (testosterone) influence our behavior too, in addition to the environment.

Cognitive psychology - Mediation processes occur between stimulus and response, such as memory, thinking, problem solving etc.

Further Information

Learning: The Power of Association. 

Classical Conditioning

Operant Conditioning

References

- Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1963). *Social learning and personality development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Hull, C. L. (1943). *Principles of Behavior: An Introduction to Behavior Theory*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Pavlov, I. P. (1897). *The Work Of The Digestive Glands*. London: Griffin
- Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden Two*. New York: Macmillan.
- Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Knopf.
- Thorndike, E. L. (1905). *The elements of psychology*. New York: A. G. Seiler.
- Watson, J. B. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it, *Psychological Review*, 20, 158-178.
- Watson, J. B. (1930). *Behaviorism* (revised edition). University of Chicago Press.
- Watson, J. B., & Rayner, R. (1920). **Conditioned emotional reactions**. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 3, 1, pp. 1–14.

How to cite this article:

McLeod, S. A. (2007). *Behaviorism - Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/behaviorism.html>